Poet Concerned

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Reed Arvin

> ***Over the last decade, Reed Arvin has been privileged (his own admission) to be both friend and producer to Rich Mullins. He was there when the first tentative chords and vocals were laid down on vinyl (it was ten years ago, remember), and in 1996, he's still the man at the helm for Mullin's latest, Songs, an aptly titled retrospective of some of Christian music's most popular songs as penned and performed by everyone's favorite ragamuffin.***
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> ***Arvin has also sat in the producer's chair for artists 4Him and Bruce Carroll and has been composer of some snappy little ditties for television commercials. His talent even extends into the written word, as evidenced in his popular first novel, The Wind in the Wheat, the story of a Christian artist's climb to and a struggle with stardom. His novel's hero, who many surmise was based on Mr. Mullins himself, is in reality, the embodiment of Reed's experiences working within the Christian music industry. As for Rich, his story is probably most easily found in the songs he writes, as Reed Arvin has discovered each and every time he's worked by his side.***
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> *There's a Bible story that reminds me of Rich Mullins. Maybe you remember it: early in the book of Acts, Peter and his buddies are preaching within earshot of the Sadducees. Peter, not known for his tact, is stepping on toes, both social and political. He's calling spades spades, and the spades don't like it. In fact, they want it stopped. So the Sadducees call Peter and his pals into a big meeting, and give them a funny kind of order: "Look," they say, "you can believe whatever you want, but would you just shut up about it?"*
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> *This, my friends, is a sentence often uttered to Rich Mullins. Not by Sadducees, or course - by record company reps and even by producers,*

like me. "Do you have to talk politics in your concerts?" "What, may I ask, do oil companies have to do with the gospel?" "We all know televangelists are mainly crooks, but did you have to name names?" In other words: "Rich, you can believe whatever you want, but would you just shut up about it?"

Shutting up, thank God (and I mean that quite literally) is not what Rich Mullins is very good at. I've always believed his gift is only part music; the other part is pure prophecy, and it's a gift that lies uneasily on its recipient. Prophets aren't necessarily the best party guests. But if Rich Mullins were better adjusted and better behaved, a lot of art would not exist in this world, and a lot of truth would still be unspoken. A lot of the songs that you and I have been ministered to by would still be thin air. Of course, with all those toes getting stepped on, it also must be said a lot of hurt feelings would never have needed repairing. Maybe even a few enemies would have remained unmade. But prophets occupy the space between the risk and the payoff and that's where Rich Mullins lives.

To tell or not to tell? What would you do? Suppose you had this crazy gift, this prophetic vision that compelled you go be the one to point the finger, to tell the tales. Would you want it? Or would you shirk it, preferring to be liked by all rather than sincerely admired by a few?

At least in Rich Mullins' case, he gets to tell his tales with a song, and that dulls the blade even while it sharpens the truth. There's comfort in the poetry - a place to hide in the beauty of language. After all, he's pointing the knife at himself most of the time, anyway. If we get cut, its from shrapnel, not blades, Rich Mullins of the exploding songs.....

Songs are where Rich's greatest gift resides, even though he is a powerful communicator in other ways. It's in the songs that whatever message God has chosen to flow through Rich greets the world. And after eight albums, it was high time to put together a compilation - a collection of work that represents the best of some very fine, highly explosive writing.

But putting together a collection meant making tough decisions. How could we pick which ones to include with so many options? Only 12 could make the grade, with three new songs added to put punctuation on a long musical sentence. Here's how record companies normally make that choice: they make a list of all the radio hits; they take the ones that charted the highest and they're done thinking about it. But when they made a list of

Rich's singles that charted in the top five, there were 20 of them, so that didn't help. Choices had to be made.

Maybe your list would've been different. But how could you leave any of the ones that are on the project off? Could you do without "Creed?" Could you abandon "Awesome God?" Forget "Sometimes by Step?" Or "Hold Me Jesus?" See what I mean? In the end, all the songs on the disc remained because there was no way to cut them. They mean too much. And you could, perhaps, make another complete disc with different songs that mean as much to you. But CDs only hold so much music.

Recording new songs on a Best of is always a little tricky. After all, you've already put together your finest work, and anything you add to it needs to be at least as good; you hope, of course, that it will be even better. It's a chance and a challenge to show what you've learned. And there's the record company, too - they want more radio hits. But radio singles are usually picked from a disc-full of new material. With only three new songs added on Rich's project, there wasn't much margin for error.

As usual, Rich wanted to do something different. Two of the tracks on Songs aren't really new at all: "Elijah" from his debut album, is a song that many people feel is Rich's finest ever. But when we did it the first time, we were a couple of bums trying to figure out which end of the microphone to plug in. "So let's record it again," Rich said, "but bring it up to date a bit." Agreed. One down, two to go.

"Sing Your Praise to the Lord" was the first song Rich ever had professionally recorded, if you can imagine that. The song of the decade. The song that sky-rocketed Any Grant's career. A cornerstone of Christian music. And that, of course, was why we argued over it. I didn't want to record it. What can you add to a classic? But Rich revealed a secret: there was a long middle section that had never been heard before that Amy's camp had neglected to include Rich wanted it unveiled. So a new, acoustic guitar driven version of possibly the most famous song in contemporary Christian music made the disc. Two down, one left.

"We Are Not As Strong As We Think We Are" is a different kind of song for Rich; it's an unabashed love song. Different, yet the same; the same passion and fragile humanness are there, exposing more, perhaps, than the composer would have wished. If you ever wondered what kind of song Rich Mullins would write you after you broke up with him, this song is the

answer.

And so the tradition continues - what most of us shut up about, Rich speaks. It gets him in a lot of trouble, but it gets him a lot of adulation, too. And caught in that tension he keeps on, taking his place in a treasured line of artists who speak the unspeakable.

So the disc, Songs, is a history of writing and singing and arguing and winning and losing. What does it all mean? The songs will mean something a little different to each one of you. What it meant to me to be on the other side of the glass as Rich told his tales doesn't fit in a sentence or two - not after eight records.

There is space on the liner notes of every album for the producer to write his personal thanks. I didn't say much this time because I didn't know what to say after so long. So I'll say it now: Rich, thank you for sharing too much. You turned your wounds into art, and I'm grateful. You'll find your peace when art has a name. Until then, may you quill never run dry.

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